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500,000 MORE ONTARIANS WITH ACCESS TO A FAMILY DOCTOR AS RESULT OF INVESTMENTS IN FAMILY DOCTORS

McGuinty Government and Ontario Medical Association Have Worked Together to Reduce Number of Patients Without a Doctor

TORONTO – The McGuinty Government, working with Ontario's doctors, has made significant progress since 2003 to increase the number of Ontarians with access to family physicians, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman and Ontario Medical Association President Dr. Janice Willett announced today.

"For the first time in a decade, the province has seen an increase in the number of Ontarians who have ready access to a family doctor," Smitherman said. "There is more to do, but working with Ontario's doctors we have turned the corner and we are poised to build on this progress."

Based on independent survey data and data from Statistics Canada, when population growth is accounted for, the number of Ontarians with regular access to a family doctor has increased by 500,000. According to the Primary Care Access Survey, undertaken by an independent research group at York University, about one million Ontarians are currently without a family doctor. Without significant investments in primary care since 2003, this number would have been much higher. Of those without access to a family doctor, the survey also shows that approximately 388,000 people are considered "in-transit" at any given time, either between physicians due to population migration or because their physician moved, retired or left practice.

"Initiatives and incentives introduced in recent years have been instrumental in improving the ability of patients to access the medical expertise of a family doctor," said Dr. Janice Willett, President of the Ontario Medical Association. "To further improve recruitment and retention efforts, we need to continue to take steps to make Ontario a more attractive and competitive place to practice medicine."

This increase has occurred due to many factors including:

- Many family physicians are working longer hours and accepting new patients;
- 150 Family Health Teams introduced since 2003, which have allowed nurse practitioners and other health care professionals to leverage the medical expertise of physicians to assist in seeing more patients. There now are more than 1,400 doctors and 588 other health care professionals working in Family Health Teams;
- An increase in the supply of family physicians working in Ontario by 3.4% between 2003 and 2005 due in part to an expansion of the province's International Medical Graduate program and efforts to attract and retain physicians by making Ontario a jurisdiction of choice for those looking to practice primary care;

- Incentives available to Primary Care Physicians in all models to encourage the enrolment of patients that formerly did not have a family physician.

In September 2006, the Ministry and the Ontario Medical Association formed a joint working group to understand the size, scope, distribution, and depth of unattached patients in Ontario and to focus joint efforts on developing strategies to reduce the number of Ontarians without a family physician.

The Ministry and the OMA are continuing their work with priority being given to efforts to increase access for Ontarians who are most in need, such as older citizens and those with chronic diseases.

As part of the recently completed joint review of the Four-Year Physician Services Agreement, the Ministry and the OMA have agreed to additional investments in incentives to encourage physicians to enrol more patients in primary care models.

Access to family doctors will also continue to rise significantly over the coming years because of other McGuinty government initiatives, including:

- Opening the Northern Ontario School of Medicine with 56 medical school spaces and expanding enrollment in our southern medical schools by 104 new spaces. This will mean that there will be a total of 852 first-year medical school spaces in 2008, an increase of 23 percent;

- More than doubling the number of training and assessment positions available each year for International Medical Graduates to 200 from 90 in 2004. Last year the government surpassed its own target by offering a record 218 positions to foreign-trained doctors. Since 2003, approximately 750 International Medical Graduates have received certificates to practice in Ontario and there are currently more than 500 IMGs enrolled in ministry-funded training and assessment programs;

- Investing $43 million in the creation of 141 new family medicine training positions. This 70 per cent increase in training positions will lead to 337 additional family doctors in practice by 2008.

These initiatives are part of the McGuinty government's plan for innovation in public health care, building a system that delivers on three priorities - keeping Ontarians healthy, reducing wait times and providing better access to doctors and nurses.

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